

Nine killed in heavy fighting in Sri Lanka

AFP, Colombo

At least nine Tamil Tiger rebels were killed as Sri Lankan troops fought pitched battles in the island's north, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) endured a "heavy beating" as troops advanced towards Kilinochchi, the rebels' political capital, the ministry said, adding the bodies of nine were found after separate clashes.

The ministry said government soldiers suffered only minor damage during the ongoing offensive, mostly due to anti-personal mines and small arms fire. It did not give casualty figures.

The LTTE did not comment on Tuesday's fighting.

"According to the military, identified LTTE locations were pounded with continuous artillery and mortar attacks followed by a swift military incursion," the ministry said.

Fighting has escalated since Sri Lanka pulled out of a Norwegian-backed truce in January.

The rebels are battling for a homeland for minority Tamils in a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives since 1972.



A crowd of Indian Sikh devotees wait as they prepare to pay their respect at the Golden Temple in Amritsar yesterday, on the eve of the 539th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev. Guru Nanak Dev, the first of ten Sikh gurus, was born in 1469 in Talwandi, a village in Sheikhpura district some 65 kms west of present-day Lahore in Pakistan.

Baghdad car bombs kill 6

AFP, Baghdad

Six people were killed and around two dozen wounded yesterday as two car bomb explosions struck the Iraqi capital, police said.

Four people were killed, including two policemen, and another 14 wounded when a bomb went off in a parking lot near Saadun street, a main thoroughfare running through the heart of Baghdad.

The city has seen a string of attacks in recent days, most of them targeting Iraqi security forces, which still maintain a heavy presence on the streets despite a dramatic improvement in security over the past several months.

Another car bomb went off later in the residential Shaab neighbourhood of northeast Baghdad, killing two people and wounding another 10, according to police, who said the blast hit an area with several schools.

Overall security in Iraq has improved significantly over the past year as US and Iraqi forces allied with local Sunni militias have flooded into formerly ungovernable districts. But militants continue to carry out near-daily attacks.

Freighter spills 100 tonnes of oil off Taiwan

AFP, Taipei

A freighter that ran aground off the north coast of Taiwan has spilled more than 100 tonnes of heavy oil that is threatening wildlife in the region, officials said yesterday.

The spill from the 14,663-tonne "Morning Sun," a Panama-registered cargo vessel, washed up on a three-kilometre stretch of coast, the Environmental Protection Administration said.

"We've set up an emergency group to handle the accident," believed to be the worst marine pollution incident in the area in 10 years, Chen Hsien-hung, chief of the agency's Water Quality Protection Bureau, told AFP.

Two hundred people were to be put to work cleaning up the coast, Chen said, adding that oil booms had been used to prevent the spill from spreading.

A nearby nuclear power plant, which relies on sea water to cool its reactors, was put on alert.

The 18 crew were rescued after the ship ran aground on Monday, Chen said.

Pyongyang says it never agreed to N-sampling

AFP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday it had never agreed to allow samples to be taken from nuclear facilities as part of six-nation efforts to scrap its nuclear weapons.

A foreign ministry spokesman said in a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency that such a demand was not part of an October agreement on verification procedures reached with Washington.

"Insisting on the so-called international standards and trying to demand more than what has been agreed upon between the DPRK (North Korea) will be considered as a house search and breach of sovereignty," the statement said.

"And breach of sovereignty will certainly bring about a war."

The North also said it had slowed down work to disable its Yongbyon atomic complex in protest at delays by negotiating partners in delivering promised energy aid.

US aid worker shot dead in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

A US development worker and his driver were shot dead yesterday in northwest Pakistan, where a wave of violence has been blamed on militants linked to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

They were ambushed in the provincial capital of Peshawar, in an area close to where a senior US diplomat in Pakistan, a close ally of Washington in the US-led "war on terror," escaped an assassination attempt in August.

"I can confirm that an American citizen and his Pakistani driver were killed in the attack," US embassy spokesman Wes Robertson told AFP.

"The attack is currently under investigation and we are coordinating with the local authorities," he said.

Officials said the American worked with FDP, a programme funded by the United States to help develop the lawless tribal areas

along the Afghan border where Islamist militants have been flourishing.

"He was heading towards his office in the University Town area," when the ambush happened, said an FDP official who asked not to be named.

Peshawar, which is close to the Afghan border, has a population of more than 2.5 million people, in addition to about 1.7 million Afghan refugees uprooted during the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

The city, capital of North West Frontier Province, is witnessing a surge in violence blamed on Taliban militants, as Pakistani troops have launched operations against guerrilla fighters in the frontier region.

US forces have also launched airstrikes in the region aimed at top militants which have caused friction with the new Pakistan government of President Asif Ali Zardari, who succeeded Pervez Musharraf earlier this year.

Nepal's Maoist govt to return land, property

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist prime minister has pledged that former rebels will return land and property they seized during the country's bitter civil war, officials said yesterday.

Nepal's Maoists signed up for peace in 2006 and now control the government after winning elections earlier this year that led to the abolition of the country's unpopular monarchy.

During the decade-long insurgency that killed at least 13,000 people, Nepal's Maoists grabbed land and property owned by thousands of absentee landlords in the rural areas they controlled.

"The prime minister said that if the property was not returned before the December 15 deadline the government would provide compensation," said Ram Chandra Poudel, a lawmaker from the Nepali Congress party.

The ultra-leftists were elected promising revolutionary land reform in Nepal, one of the world's poorest countries, and vowed to help landless agricultural workers.

Ex-leader's detention tests Taiwanese democracy

AP, Taipei

The arrest of former Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian in a corruption case yesterday is set to deepen political divisions in the normally fractious country, with the former leader's supporters accusing the government of a political vendetta.

Chen's detention which started dramatically Tuesday when he was led away in handcuffs from a prosecutors' office drew small protests by supporters in his pro-independence camp and cheers from rival China, which claims the democratic island as part of its territory. Newspapers in China plastered photos of a handcuffed Chen on front pages.

The Taipei court ordered Chen held under a type of pre-indictment detention after prosecutors

accused him of laundering money and illegally tapping a special fund during his presidency.

Chen has denied any wrongdoing. But the detention marks a further downfall for a landmark figure in Taiwanese politics. A crusading lawyer-turned-politician, Chen won the presidency for the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party in 2000, wresting political control for the first time in 50 years from the Nationalists.

But corruption allegations helped cripple the last years of his eight years in office. The DPP candidate was trounced in the March election by the Nationalist's Ma Ying-jeou, who has pushed speedily to improve relations with Beijing.

Ma struck a sympathetic note about Chen's detention. "It saddens instead of cheering us, and I

will take it as a lesson personally," Ma said in a radio interview early Wednesday.

Opponents of Chen, however, lit off fireworks in celebration.

Relations with China remain a divisive issue in Taiwan, which split from the mainland amid civil war nearly six decades ago. Some Taiwanese want the island to declare formal independence from China, a small number want to unify, while most people support the fuzzy status quo.

Chen's detention further demoralised his Democratic Progressive Party, with politicians calling the arrest politically motivated. About 20 DPP lawmakers denounced the detention at a news conference Wednesday, calling it part of a government plot to "thoroughly crush the opposition in the name of democracy and justice."

India test-fires medium range surface missile

AP, New Delhi

India successfully test-fired a medium-range, surface-to-surface missile yesterday, the defence ministry said.

The new Shourya (Valor) missile has a range of 600 kilometres, the ministry said in a statement that hailed the technology as "state of the art."

India and longtime rival Pakistan routinely test-fire missiles. They usually notify each other ahead of missile launches in keeping with an agreement between the two nations.

"The high maneuverability of the missile makes it less vulnerable to available anti-missile defense systems," the ministry said.

A ministry official earlier said the weapon tested was a nuclear-capable K-15 missile, an undersea submarine-launched ballistic missile with a range of up to 700

kilometres. He spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to media.

The Shourya missile was fired from a test range in Balasore in eastern Orissa state, nearly 1,300 kilometres southeast of New Delhi, the ministry said.

India's current crop of missiles are mostly intended for confronting neighboring archrival Pakistan, but the country's longest-range missile, the Agni 3, is designed to travel 3,000 kilometres -- putting China's major cities well into range, as well as targets deep in the Middle East.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since their independence from Britain in 1947. They have been holding peace talks since 1994 aimed at resolving their differences, including their dispute over the Himalayan region of Kashmir.

N Korea says it will shut border with south

AFP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday it would close its border with South Korea from next month in protest at what it called Seoul's confrontational stance, a move that could cripple a joint industrial estate.

The communist state announced that a measure "to strictly restrict and cut off all the overland passages" would take effect from December 1, the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported.

A total closure of the heavily fortified border would effectively shut down the Seoul-funded Kaesong industrial complex built just north of the frontier as a symbol of reconciliation.

It would also halt a popular tourist trip to Kaesong city.

South Korea's unification ministry expressed regret and urged the North to restart stalled dialogue.

Spokesman Kim Ho-Nyoun said he did not believe the North intended a complete closure.

Wednesday's announcement follows months of icy relations, including threats by the North to expel South Koreans from Kaesong in protest at the spreading of cross-border propaganda leaflets by Seoul activists.

Cross-border relations soured after conservative South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak took office in February. He promised to take a firmer line with the North after a decade-long "sunshine" engagement policy.

Lee said he would review summit agreements between the North and his liberal predecessors, which envisage projects costing tens of billions of dollars.

The North is also angry with South Korean activists who launch balloons carrying hundreds of thousands of leaflets across the border.

Islamist rebels take over port in Somalia

AFP, Mogadishu

Somalia's hardline Shebab group yesterday took over the southern port of Merka, a key entry point for food aid, further tightening the Islamists' grip on the war-torn Horn of Africa country.

Hundreds of heavily-armed Shebab fighters rolled into Merka town, some 100 kilometres south of the war-riven capital Mogadishu, after pro-government forces fled.

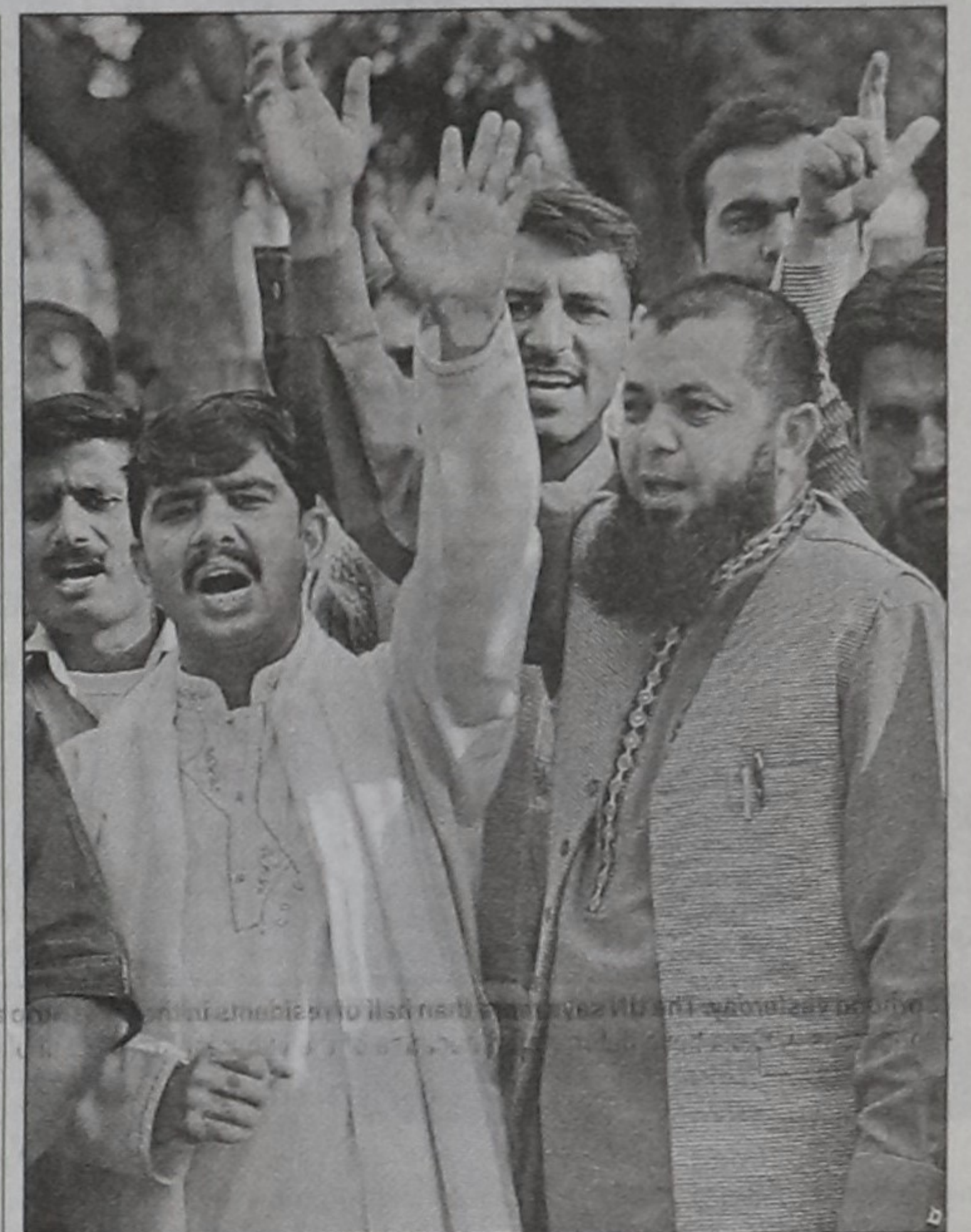
"It seems that they are gaining control now and we did not have much power to defend the town," said Hussein Yusuf Maalim, a member of the pro-government militia that ruled the town.

"Our commander ordered all the forces to leave the town in order to avoid any firefight," he added.

"They were armed with heavy machine guns and RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades)," said Ibrahim Abdalla Ali, a Merka resident.

"Hundreds of them entered the town and took control of the police station and other key positions in the town."

Islamists have made significant military gains in recent months, leaving the embattled western-backed transitional federal government only in control of some parts of the capital Mogadishu and Baidoa, where parliament is seated.



Pakistani journalists shout slogans as they march during a protest rally in Islamabad yesterday against the killing of a journalist. A local newspaper journalist was shot dead last week when he did not stop his car as a military convoy passed during a curfew in Pakistan's restive northwestern Swat valley.

Sudan declares Darfur ceasefire

AFP, Khartoum

Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir yesterday announced an immediate ceasefire in Darfur and called for a campaign to disarm militias which have been ravaging the western region.

"I hereby announce our immediate unconditional ceasefire between the armed forces and warring factions provided that an effective monitoring mechanism be put into action and be observed by all involved parties," Beshir said, according to an official translation.

He was speaking after hearing the final recommendations of the Sudan government-sponsored "people's initiative," which was boycotted by Darfur rebel groups fighting the government for the past five years.

Beshir also called for "an immediate campaign to disarm the militias and restrict the use of weapons amongst armed forces," in apparent reference to the feared Janjaweed militia that Khartoum is accused of backing.

"We confirm our commitment of negotiations to reach peaceful solutions which guarantee the eradication of disputes," Beshir

said. The people's initiative recommendations are expected to lay a foundation for a possible peace conference in Qatar by the end of 2008.

Sudan is pressing a diplomatic offensive to persuade the UN Security Council to delay possible proceedings against Beshir, who could face an international arrest warrant for alleged war crimes in Darfur.

6 die in Mumbai bldg collapse

AFP, Mumbai

Six members of the same family, including two children, were killed yesterday when a building near one of Mumbai's most famous landmarks collapsed, officials said.

The 70-year-old four-storey building near Crawford Market in the south of India's financial capital came down during the morning, crushing the victims under tonnes of rubble and masonry.

"Piling work next to the building could be the cause of the collapse," municipal commissioner J. Pathak said.

Lack of troops, 'schizophrenic' mandate hamper UN in DR Congo

AFP, Kinshasa

With a "schizophrenic" mandate and a lack of troops and logistics, UN peacekeepers in Democratic Republic of Congo are being accused of powerlessness in the face of conflict, diplomats and analysts say.

Despite the presence of 5,800 peacekeepers in Nord-Kivu province, rebels led by Laurent Nkunda have come as close as 15 kilometres to the provincial capital Goma.

Last week, what the head of the UN mission in Congo (MONUC), Alan Doss, called war crimes took place virtually under the eyes of about 140 peacekeepers based in Kiwanja, north of Goma.

MONUC has a clear mandate to open fire to protect civilians, but in Kiwanja -- where Human Rights Watch says at least 50 were slain last week -- the head of UN peacekeeping, Alain Le Roy, acknowledged it should have done just that.

MONUC, which has opened fire several times on the rebels, has been reinforcing its personnel in Goma to avoid a repeat of 2004 when Nkunda's fighters briefly captured Bukavu, in Sud-Kivu province, from 600 peacekeepers.

"UN troops are crossing

guards," a diplomatic source in Congo told AFP on condition of anonymity. "When things are no longer going right, they save themselves. Zero fatalities is their policy."

Deployed since 2001, MONUC is the biggest UN peacekeeping mission anywhere, with 17,000 soldiers in country as big as Europe is "from Portugal up to Russia," said Pierre-Antoine Braud, a former UN political adviser.

In early October, Doss called for 3,000 extra troops for Nord-Kivu -- a plea that remains unanswered by the UN Security Council, which Tuesday took no decision on reinforcing the mission.

The council is to take up the issue again on November 26 following a report from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

Apart from more boots on the ground, MONUC needs "better means" of intelligence -- such as drones and satellite imagery -- to decipher rebel intentions, said Xavier Zeebroeck of the Peace and Security Research and Information Group (GRIP) in Brussels.

In fact, MONUC only has 1.14 million dollars a year to spend, equal to "a week of the US pres-

ence in Iraq," said Braud, a co-founder of Bridging International, a network of conflict and post-conflict consultants.

That is a meagre budget, and "a major source of its lack of popularity," given its "schizophrenic" mandate, Zeebroeck said.

"The rebels accuse MONUC of fighting against them, the Congolese army accuses it of not fighting enough with it, and the

people accuse it of no longer protecting them."

"The result is that no one trusts it anymore."

Risky operations by the Congolese army have also helped to discredit MONUC, a diplomatic source said, with government forces "starting action without consultation with MONUC and then asking it to take over when it becomes a rout."



Congolese Army soldiers light cigarettes as they man a frontline position near a road leading into the North Kivu provincial capital city of Goma in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) yesterday.